

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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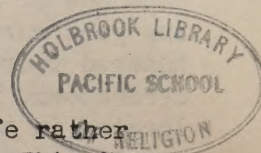
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AGRICULTURE AS A WAY OF LIFE**

The Point of View of the Church of the Brethren

By the Rev. Charles D. Bonsack*



Our subject intends to emphasize agriculture as a way of life rather than as a matter of business or for the purpose of earning our bread. This is an important difference even though it is difficult to clarify. Whatever our daily employment, it should be a way of life. It must challenge our best thought and noblest endeavor. It must stimulate mind and soul, as well as body. It ought to keep us in touch with God and men, and help build good home and community life. To allow our daily toil to become less than this robs it of its highest joy and deepest satisfaction.

We must realize that life is spiritual. Its greatest joy is realized through its motives, attitudes and relationships. It is selfish to earn a dollar without contributing to the common good of all. A few dollars gained at the expense of a happy home life does not pay. The sacrifice of conscience or character for cash is a poor bargain. There is a hunger for the divine in every normal life, as well as a desire to share the blessings of social enrichment. Both of these must be considered in the day's work if we would prevent our daily toil from becoming drudgery in living only for selfish ends.

Agriculture particularly demands this life emphasis. Many of its duties demand hard work in all kinds of weather which is certain to become drudgery without this spiritual vision. On the other hand, those of us who may try to encourage the farmer in his independent and fundamental contribution to mankind, must get somewhat closer to the feel and atmosphere of farm life. Close enough to know more about the chores and discouragements that drive him from the farm, as well as the visions and opportunities that these chores have prevented him from seeing. We may have to move an agricultural conference or two from New York City to the land. A few might accept a rural pastorate, and others take charge of some land where we can get close enough to know its needs and share in its rewards, for it is indeed a way of life.

No occupation lends itself to such a complete way of life as farming. Neither is there a place where a broad education can be so fully enjoyed and so largely adapted to practical ends. We face the wisdom and providence of God every day. Tasks abound where children and parents may share in the comradeship of service. Poets and artists would be inspired by the outlook of many hours on the farm. The knowledge of chemistry, physics, and mechanics, is daily needed. Business skill and training are useful in facing the ever-changing markets. Mathematical ability is required in calculating profit and loss; and we are convinced that a lead pencil is the tool most neglected in the business of farming. The contacts with nature on the farm make a church service desirable and helpful on Sunday. Its evenings should challenge us to get together at the church or social hall or as neighbors in our homes. The quiet days on the farm make neighbors a necessity and

*The Rev. Charles D. Bonsack is General Secretary of the General Mission Board of the Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Illinois.

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a joy. They are our dependent friends in time of need, such as a fire, accident, or sickness. The farm gives constant change and challenge to life and thought. There will be disease among the animals and seasons of disappointment and hard work, but there is no job of responsibility where these do not come. With a little forethought and care these can often be avoided, and when they cannot, the corn usually grows and the garden produces, even in times like these!

Church of the Brethren and Rural Life

I was asked to speak of our own communion in relation to rural life. Perhaps one of our largest contributions as a church in the past has been that of building good rural homes and communities. Our early church fathers of more than two hundred years ago, coming out of the pietistic communities of Germany, settled at Germantown, Pennsylvania. Some went into business and were quite successful. Others located in the Schuylkill Valley on the land. Soon their pioneer and missionary spirit led them westward into the Conestoga Valley of Pennsylvania and ultimately across much of the middle west. The love of the soil marked the life of our people for 150 years. This trend toward the land was probably brought over from the villages of the Rhine Valley where many of them lived and followed agricultural pursuits. This background was stimulated by those early days in the wilderness where necessity demanded that food should be produced.

Since the Church of the Brethren grew out of this agricultural background, both its homes and church life were organized with adaptation to rural life. There was great emphasis on religion in those days because it was for this reason that most of them sought the freedom of America. This gave great religious emphasis in the home and family life of our fathers, and has remained a vital emphasis through the years. The spirit of fellowship and cooperation was strong from the beginning, which explains our denominational name. The church organization was simple and patterned after an understanding of the apostolic methods. Ministers and deacons were selected, the former to care for the spiritual interests, and the latter the material interests of the congregation. These, together, were the official board to guide the work of the church, with every member, male and female, young and old, having the privilege of voting on all things brought before the congregation.

One of the adaptations to rural life was the relation and selection of their ministers. These were selected from among the congregations more on their religious attitudes, integrity and confidence of the people, their leadership and successful management of their own affairs, than upon any special training or desire for that service. In fact, any great desire for the ministry was a sign of disqualification for it. Those selected often knew nothing of it before their election. However, they were never installed into the office without a willing acceptance to do the best they could. There were usually two or more ministers in each congregation, one of whom was the elder or bishop, selected by the congregation, who carried its administrative responsibilities. These ministers received no salary or financial support generally, but on occasion the congregation shared in the responsibilities of his farm or otherwise, especially in time of sickness. This method of ministerial service gave the work some strong leaders. They spoke the language of the people and interpreted the scriptures and religion in terms of their need and experience. The deacons were expected to care for the physical needs of the members, visit the sick, and at least once a year visit every family in the congregation.

The family life was wholesome and religious. The Bible, being the only creed of the church, was much read and taught in the home. Large country farm homes were often the first meeting places for worship. Most of the congregation would remain for dinner and Christian fellowship. These were occasions for increased knowledge of the church, family and farm, and each was discussed with gladness of heart and religious sincerity. Much of the strength in the character

and progress of the church was wrought out of these great rural family gatherings. Even yet Christian home life and personal integrity are important goals and the fruit of our church life. It was this fact that kept our people on the farm for there they felt a freedom from the trends in city life that made it hard to train and enjoy the family life which was held in high esteem.

The spirit of the church, as reflected in its name, was one of helpfulness and brotherhood. There was little or no social distinction between the sons and daughters of the family and the hired help. The latter were members of the family, and if they proved industrious and trustworthy, were often assisted in buying stock or a farm, as were the sons. The children were encouraged to work, either as domestics in the home or on the farm, or for their neighbors. This was never a social barrier, but on the other hand, if industry and character were shown, it became often a social advancement. They believed in agriculture, both as a way of life and as an investment. Surplus funds were invested in land, usually, knowing that the children would marry and want a home. Preparations for such events began early, both in the house and on the farm. Surplusses were put aside for the future home. Many a Brethren family with eight or ten children would provide a farm for each of them by the time such was necessary, sometimes by renting temporarily, and later buying. It was knowledge and love of the land that took many families westward as the price of land in the east advanced, so that they might provide a farm for all of the children who cared to follow that life--and most of them did in the earlier days.

The Church of the Brethren, for the most part, was interested in the education of its children. A few communities may have been backward, where they were influenced by their surroundings. The first effort to advance rural public schools beyond the grades, in the county where the writer lived, was accomplished by a group of successful farmers in the vicinity of a Brethren church. By private subscription they helped to build an addition to the schoolhouse and hire an assistant teacher to bring in many studies not yet used in the county. This led to the development of a community spirit in the interest of the school and homes somewhat like a modern parent-teachers' association. At least it was a cooperative investment of interest and money that bore great fruitfulness to the community that abides even today.

Changes that Have Come

The many changes that have influenced life in our modern world have had their effect on the church. The public schools and their atmosphere partook more of the urban life of our country. The marvels of modern machinery and industry attracted our boys. The Farm Journal gave way to Popular Mechanics. The consolidated schools enlarged our interests and social contacts. The love for education sent our children to high school and college. The church itself provided eight or ten colleges, of which about six exist today with fair success. This took our youth from the farm and its environment and quickly introduced the urban philosophy of life. The simpler games of rural fellowship gave way to the love of literature, drama and music which the rural church found difficult to provide. Where this advanced culture was followed by adequate adaptation of the church, its life has been maintained with reasonable success. But in most places our youth followed largely modern culture, and looked toward the white collar jobs of the professions. Thousands are teaching.

This rapid inroad of culture led our youth to the cities. They began to feel dissatisfied with the practical teaching and preaching of the rural ministers. There was a demand for more academic training upon the part of the ministry. They wanted sermons illustrated by quotations from Shakespeare or Browning rather than from experiences on the farm. This need was partly real and partly due to a super-sensitiveness of the consciousness of having so lately come from the farm.

Some have sufficiently recovered from the latter feeling that they would welcome an intelligent drama of the soil and some poetry from the fields, even such as Jesus, Himself, was prone to use!

These things led to a supported pastoral system. This has worked well in the cities where cash is more abundant and where the people are trained to perform more of their duties by proxy. In the rural areas it has failed to meet the needs with desired satisfaction. Too often the training is not adapted to the needs of a rural people. The ministers in a community where the pay is inadequate often find it difficult to fit into the situation, and move frequently. This prevents them from becoming a part of the community life and they fail to understand its needs and to provide the social, spiritual and recreational program that will make the rural church a blessing and a success as it was under the former indigenous leadership. However, there are some splendid exceptions. We have some good men whose tastes and training fit them well for rural work. These have built vital programs for the spiritual and social life of the church and community, and are happy in their success. There are also some rural churches in many areas where the ministers, engaged in farming or other employment, still continue to minister helpfully to their congregations and where even the youth rallies to the church program.

Suggestions and Hope for the Future

First, we must overcome a lot of superficial thinking. Success in life is not indicated by the crease in our trousers nor the color of our ties. Neither is progress indicated by the amount of cash we spend. We must remember that the soil, plus intelligent management by men, is the foundation of the raw materials for industry. From the soil come all of life's necessities of food, raiment and shelter. What the land needs is intelligent management. Any people or community that cares for the land and its products can have almost everything else; but neglecting it, they ultimately lose all.

Second, we must remember that science and invention have done much to bring the rural areas into the place they deserve. Good roads and the automobile have made the farmer the neighbor of us all, with parking space free. He can carry on much of his business over the telephone, even as his city cousin. The radio brings him the news and music with less static, both electric and human. And when each family has its airplane there will be more space for landing down on the farm than in New York!

Third, we must return to the soil men of vision and intelligent training--those who appreciate its sacred altars of life and God, and those who understand the laboratory of nature, who can fathom its resources and attract to its wide open spaces men and women who love work and worship, and will again build homes and communities where life can reach its best.

Fourth, the rural church must become a fellowship, both warm and spiritual, where God is worshipped in the beauty of fields and flowers, where children and youth can find expression and grow in every fellowship of work and play so that body, mind and spirit may be strong. Where joy is natural and gladness overflows from that which is normal and righteous.

Fifth, there must be some readjustments in our methods; more intelligent organization of time and resources on the farm. Some rest and leisure for tired mothers. Social privileges and sympathetic guidance of youth. School and college training in an environment sympathetic to rural life and work. Faith in the land as an investment and provision made for needed funds to help worthy young people to get started.

Sixth, we must remember the basic place of agriculture. The land produces that which is essential to life and comfort. Products of the farm meet the common needs of us all. For this reason they can be sold for cash without high power salesmanship. The consumer and the farmer will do well to understand each other and plan for closer cooperation and mutual helpfulness.
